

## Tree of the Month, April 2014: Japanese larch, karamatsu (*Larix kaempferi*)

As spring takes hold at VanDusen, the Japanese larches are covered in tiny, pale-green, immature female and male cones, which grow out of distinctive branch structures called spurs. The female cones are upright, while the male pollen cones hang downwards. Soon the needles will emerge - soft green in spring, turning golden yellow in autumn before dropping off for the winter. *Larix kaempferi* is the only deciduous conifer native to Japan, with natural populations in the mountains of Honshu Island. Japanese larch is an important timber species, and is grown in plantations in Japan, Northern Europe and Britain.

*Larix kaempferi* was named for Englebert Kaempfer, a German naturalist who worked as a physician for the Dutch East India Company. From 1690 to 1692, Kaempfer was stationed at the Company's trading post on Dejima Island (separated from the mainland by a man-made canal) in the bay of Nagasaki, Japan. Japan at this time was ruled by the isolationist Tokugawa Military Shogunate (Edo Period), and was trading only with China and the Netherlands. The Dutch were normally not allowed to leave Dejima to visit the mainland, but as a physician, Kaempfer was allowed to accompany the Chief Dutch Official, the *Opperhoofd*, on two long trips to visit the Shogun at his palace in Edo (Tokyo). During his travels, Kaempfer had a chance to study some of the local plant life. He later wrote a book called the *Flora Japonica*, and was one of the first Western naturalists to write about the plants of Japan.

The Japanese common name for *Larix kaempferi* is "karamatsu", which translates as "Chinese pine". This is a reference to the landscape paintings of the famous 12<sup>th</sup>-century Chinese artist Li T'ang, whose work often features rocky outcrops covered in pine trees that closely resemble Japanese larches.